Note-taking: A Required Skill for Students of Interpreting[*]

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Abstract:
 Interpreting is a complicated form of oral translation which is based on short term memory. Consecutive interpreting is one of the modes of interpreting which uses notes to help the memory to restore more information. Therefore, unlike simultaneous interpreting where there is no scope for taking notes, in consecutive interpreting notes play a vital role for recalling the information. Consequently, consecutive interpreters should be aware of the importance of note-taking and should learn this skill to improve their interpretation. This article tried to offer some useful information about the principle of taking notes in consecutive interpreting.

Keywords: interpreting, simultaneous interpreting, consecutive interpreting, note-taking

1. Introduction

 Gile (2004) distinguished two modes for interpreting; simultaneous and consecutive. He mentioned that "simultaneous interpreting (SI) is a mode in which the interpreter reformulates the source speech as it unfolds, generally with a lag of a few seconds at most" (p.11). In simultaneous interpreting (SI) the interpreter should do his rendering while the speaker continues his speeches without any pause or stop. Whereas, in consecutive interpreting (CI) the interpreter should wait until his turn and will start his rendering when the speaker allows him. In circumstances where there is one attendant in a meeting who speaks a different language and there is no time or opportunity to let the speaker pause regularly, SI is suggested. Since the speaker does not stop his speaking in simultaneous interpreting, the interpreter has a really challenging job. He should take the following steps simultaneously.

a- He should listen to the speaker.

b- He should translate what he hears in his mind into his own language.

c- He should utter his translation in a microphone.

d- While translating, he should listen to the rest of the speech.

   The most obvious difference between SI and CI is the time gap between the delivery of the speaker's message and the beginning of the interpretation. Thus, SI demands an interpreter with a high skill and great concentration. SI is a tiresome activity which consequently affects the amount of concentration, which in turn affects the final result of interpreting. If the meeting is short or there is a break, then one interpreter suffices. But in long lasting sessions, there is a need for more than one interpreter so that they can alternate.

   SI needs microphones, headsets and booths. The interpreter seats in a booth and listens to the speech through headphones and renders his translation, the audiences can   hear it wearing headsets. There is usually a team of two or more per booth interpreter depending on the number of active and passive languages. One of the per booth interpreters, interprets and the other is the consultant interpreter who helps him.

   Gile (2004) explained that in "consecutive interpreting (CI) the speaker makes a statement, which generally lasts up to a few minutes, while the interpreter takes notes; then the speaker stops and the

interpreter reformulates the statement" (p. 150). He distinguished two kinds of consecutive interpreting. The first one is true- consecutive in which the interpreter should listen to the speaker and take notes. When his turn comes, he should translate his notes. The second one is sentence-by-sentence consecutive, "where the speaker's statements are much shorter and do not require note-taking" (p. 12). Gile (1992) believed that CI consists of two separable phases. The first phase is listening to the speaker and at the same time taking notes. The second phase is reformulating, in which the interpreter uses his memory and notes to reconstruct the message of the SL for the TL audiences. Therefore:

Phase one: listening phase
CI= L(listening)+ M (Short-term Memory) + N (Note-taking)
Phase two: reformulation phase
CI= R (Remember) + R (Read the notes) + P (Produce the speech in the target language)

The pause in CI, allows the interpreter corrects his rendering and completes it. Unlike simultaneous interpreting, the interpreter is not forced to condense his translation, since the speaker waits for his rendering be finished. Generally one interpreter is enough for CI and no special equipment is required.

Comparing the final product of consecutive and that of simultaneous interpreting, Santiago (2004) mentioned that consecutive interpreters create a much more accurate final product since "the interpreter does not need to split his attention between receiving the message, and monitoring his output, as is required in simultaneous, they can devote more of their processing to analysis and reformulation of the text" (p. 5).

2. Note-taking in consecutive interpreting

Memory plays an important role in interpreting. Bowen and Bowen (1984) distinguished two types of memory for human beings. The first one is short-term memory (STM) which keeps the information for a short period of time (up to 30 seconds) and no neural mechanisms for later recall is created in it. The second is long-term memory (LTM) which creates neural pathways to save information which can be recalled weeks, months or years later. LTM is a learning process and is an important element in interpreting, since

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information stored in LTM may last for minutes to weeks, months or even an entire life.

Having powerful memory is very important in interpreting, and students of interpreting should be taught to empower their memory. But which of these two kinds of memory should be trained? The answer is STM. Since in interpreting memory lasts for a short time and when the job is finished the interpreter moves on to another conference with different subjects, speaker and audiences. Therefore, he doesn't need to keep the information of a specific conference to his mind.

Phelan (2001) also alleged that each interpreter needs two kinds of qualifications to do his best in the challenging work of interpreting: "a good short-term memory to retain what he or she has just heard and a good long-term memory to put the information into context" (pp. 4-5).

According to Lin Yuru et al. "memory training in consecutive interpreting consists of nothing more than understanding the meaning, which is conveyed by words" (1999, p. 9). Therefore, memory training is done to get a better understanding of the source text, which consequently leads to a perfect interpreting.

Ballester and Jimenez (1992) stated that any act of interpreting involves "listening, decoding, analyzing and synthesizing the message" (p. 239). But there is also another cognitive process between the analytic and synthetic stages. Seleskovitch and Lederer (1984) argued that in this stage the linguistic words of the original texts are disregarded and it is the meaning which is stored in short term memory.

As you can see, interpreting is based on short term memory. In CI, notes can support memory to restore more information. As Pham Hong Hanh (2006) explained, experiences have reviled that in CI of speeches longer than two or three minutes, note- taking is necessary.

It has been proved that note-taking is useful in CI due to several reasons. First, notes facilitate the reception and analysis of the SL speech by improving concentration and preventing distraction. Second, notes decrease the burden imposed on memory, as interpreters can resort to their notes for remembering names, dates, numbers, etc. Third, notes can be used to highlight missing details and anything that requires latter attention. Generally speaking, as is

mentioned by Kohn and Albl- Mikasa (undated) in taking notes interpreters should consider the following principles:

> - Economy: to minimise the processing effort any notation should be as scarce and brief as possible.
> – Instantaneous seizability: the strain on the memory can be effectively relieved only if the interpreter can read the notes at a glance.
> – Individuality: note-taking is not governed by any obligatory rules or regulations. Generally speaking, anything that supports its function or that is subjectively felt to do so is admissible. (p. 258)

Therefore, notes are of vital importance in CI and every interpreter should practically learn the principles of note-taking.

Jones (2002) believed that taking notes is a part of the process of CI which itself includes: understanding the speech, analyzing it and reconstructing SL speech for the TL audiences. She believes that if any of these activities "are not done correctly, the best notes in the world will not make a good interpreter" (p. 39**).** In any act of note-taking, as is claimed by Pham Hong Hanh (2006) an interpreter should answer three basic questions: 1) what to note? 2) How to note? and 3) when to note?.

3. What to note?

Interpreters should be aware of the fact that in the process of note-taking, they should note ideas rather than isolated words. Words of language are just containers for concepts and ideas. Interpreters cannot write down every single word they hear in a speech, since the speed of writing is always slower than that of speaking. Consequently, the interpreter should have the ability to detect and keep the main idea but delete any irrelevant element.

The second thing that interpreters should keep in mind while note-taking is paying attention to the links between ideas. Ideas are connected to each other by means of links and connectors. Jones (2002) divided these links into three groups. (pp. 28-29)

a) The logical consequences expressed by: consequently, as a result, accordingly, or therefore.

b) The logical cause showed by words like: because, due to, as or since.

c) Opposition showed by: but, yet, however or nevertheless.

While note-taking, the interpreter should simply write down links, as he can use them to join the written ideas on its notes later in his turn for rendering the message. Links can really prevent confusion for interpreters.

Paying attention to non-contextualized information in a speech is another important thing in note-taking. They are elements that cannot be recalled by analyzing a text and logical thinking. Proper names, terminologies, lists of things and numbers are examples of non-contextualized elements. There is a difference between these elements and main ideas of a speech. The interpreter can easily remember main ideas as they form a kind of mental image in his mind. Whereas, non-contextualized information are easily vanishable if they are not written down by interpreters.

The final thing that should receive attention in note-taking is tenses of verbs. Jones (2002) explained that "when noting verbs, interpreters should thus take care to the tense correctly, and if appropriate the mode, in particular conditional" (p. 42). This is due to the effect of mode and tense of verbs on meaning.

4. How to note?

The second question that interpreters should ask themselves is how to note? It is obvious that notes are aimed at helping the interpreter to recall much more information while rendering the speech. Therefore, they should be taken in an organized way to reach their aim. Otherwise, notes not only are not helpful for interpreters but also they waste his time and distract his attention from concentrating on the SL speech. Thus, notes should be economical and short to save interpreter's time on writing. That's why using abbreviations and symbols is one of the curtail features of note-taking.

Abbreviations help interpreters take notes quickly. They should be "unequivocal and unambiguous" (Pham Hong Hanh, 2006, p. 19). Abbreviations should be used automatically and this is possible only when interpreters develop their own system of abbreviations beforehand. Although, abbreviations may be meaningless for others, they must be meaningful for interpreters. Abbreviations can be classified into three groups:

a) Common abbreviations: which are most derived from Latin. Such as:

C.F. (confer) = compare

> i.e. (id est) = that is
> e.g. (exampla grate) = for example
> NB (nota benne) = note well
> no. (numero) = number
> etc. (et cetera) = and so on

b) Discipline-specific abbreviations: as the term reveals are technical abbreviations used in specific fields of study. Every interpreter depending on his interest in different subjects, should be familiar with the common abbreviations of that discipline. For example, in chemistry: *Au* is an abbreviation used for gold, *GM* is an abbreviation used for magnesium.

c) Personal abbreviations: these kinds of abbreviations are created by interpreters themselves and will vary from one person to another. For example, an interpreter may use the following abbreviations:

> pres → president
> countr → country
> poli → policy

According to Rozan (2005) interpreters can follow a principle in creating abbreviations. They can a) write what they hear just by recording the sounds of that word. For instance, interpreters should write the abbreviated form *hi* for the word high, b) drop medial vowels. For example, the word legal can be abbreviated as *lgl*, and c) write initial and final vowels. Thus, office can be written as *ofs*. Furthermore, Rozan (2005) advised interpreters to avoid ambiguity in writing abbreviations. Therefore, if they have an abbreviation such as **prod** in their notes it could be read as: production, producer, product, or productivity. Whereas, if written this way the ambiguity is removed: **pr** [on] , **pr** [er] , **pr** [ct] , **pr** [vity] . Moreover, the tense of verbs should also be stated clearly, thus, for future tense [ll] and for past tense [d] should be used. To avoid writing long expressions in notes and saving time, it is recommended to use a shorter word with the same meaning. Thus, "in order to arrive at some conclusion" can be noted as "to end. Familiarity with the abbreviated forms of international organizations is also of great importance in interpreting.

4.1 Negation and emphasis

Every speech contains elements that represent negative ideas or emphasize on an issue, which should be noted without any kind of ambiguity while interpreting. Herbert (1956) offered some rules for

noting these elements. Two methods have been suggested for negation. The first one is using a line running through a word or symbol. For instance, if "ok" is used to indicate "agree" then "disagree" should be written as " ~~ok~~ ". The second method is simply writing "no" before the negative word. Herbert believed that this method is clearer and as the word "no" is a short word, writing it does not take a lot of time for the interpreter. Therefore, in our example we can note "not ok" (pp. 46- 47).

   In order to show emphatic words, two ways are possible. The first way is underlining the word. If the word is superlative, then it should be underlined twice. Look at the following examples;

"The study is interesting": int [g]

"The study is very interesting": <u>int</u> [g]

"The study is extremely interesting": <u>int</u> [g]

The second way is using a dotted line to show the emphasis. For example,

"This report might be useful": <u>useful</u>

4.2 Symbols

It is also suggested to use symbols in interpreting. It is even claimed that in some cases, using symbols is more preferable for interpreters. The reason is that in abbreviations the interpreter should stick to the word instead rather than the idea carried by words. Therefore, symbols are a good device for conveying ideas. Pham Hang Hanh (2006) defined symbol as "anything, a mark, sign or letter used to represent a thing or concept" (p. 24). Symbols should be prepared in advance, like abbreviations, by interpreters. Improvising any symbol just in the middle of interpreting session will cause problem for interpreters, as they should think a lot to recall what that specific symbol refers to. In addition, symbols should be consistent. In other words, an invented symbol should always be used in its first meaning and a single symbol cannot be used for various concepts. For instance, the interpreter may use the symbol > to mean   more than, greater than or the symbol < to mean less than.


4.3 Note arrangement

Another issue which is directly related to the question "how to note?" is note arrangement. Rozan (2005) introduced a practical technique for

this purpose which is called diagonal arrangement. The basis of this arrangement is the fact that subject, verb and object are the most important elements of a sentence, carrying almost all the necessary information that should be clearly represented in notes. Based on this method, interpreters should write subject, verb and object diatonically from left to right and from top to bottom of a paper. This is the natural movement of human eyes. However, the interpreter can add other details in notes if he decides it is necessary. Diagonal arrangement is a kind of concise presentation of ideas that accelerate the interpreter's review of notes. Jones (2002) illustrated this layout as follows:

subject

verb

object

let's look at an example offered by Pham Hong Hanh (2006, p. 29): "Prime minister Pham Van Khai`s 2005 visit to Washington reflected the significant improvement in bilateral relations"

It can be noted as follows by applying diagonal method:

05 PM PVK`s visit →WA

$\longrightarrow\!\!\!\rightarrow$ in VN- US rels
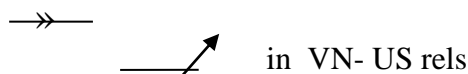
As it has been mentioned before, links are of great importance in interpreting and should not be forgotten in note-taking. Due to their role in connecting ideas together, a specific space is dedicated to them in note-taking called a left-hand margin. This space is one or two centimeters and prevents any form of confusion with other parts in note-taking. Furthermore, as Pham Hong Hanh (2006, p. 30) explained it can be used "for marking missing ideas or denoting any change in the flow of speech"

To get the function of left-hand margin look at the given example given by (Pham Hong Hanh, 2006, p. 31):
 "Hungry has complained that its steel exports to European Union are not able to develop because of excessively restrictive tariff quotas. But the Union representatives pointed out that quotas are still underused by Hungary by a large margin, so that tariff quotas themselves didn't appear to be creating the difficulties".

HU   steel export

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can not develop

to Eu

because   tariff quotas

too restrictive

but EU | Hu

understand a lot

quotas

so | quotas

not problem

Since this specific example just focuses on the function of left-hand margin, symbols and abbreviations are not used here. However, just like every other ideas, interpreters should create a system of symbols for links.

5. When to note?

The final question regarding note taking is making decision about the correct time for taking notes. Interpreters have been advised to take notes as soon as possible, and they have been recommended not to wait for a complete unit of meaning. Since, if they hesitate in writing down the information immediately after they have been uttered by the speaker and wait for more chunk of information, then they may not be able to jot down what they have heard, the result of which is loss of some parts of the uttered information. Consequently, when the interpreter can get the meaning of a sentence, even if it is not completed yet he should write it down. As the interpreter has the ability to forecast the upcoming information, he can write that part latter. In addition, notes should not necessarily be presented in exactly the same way as uttered by the speaker, thus he is not obliged to wait for the end of the sentence to take notes. It should be mentioned that, interpreters should start their rendering of the message immediately after the end of the speech. Finally, interpreters should be cautious to stop taking notes instantly after the end of speech. In other words, right after the speaker's speech, it is interpreter's turn to start his task and he should not be busy taking notes in his time.

6. Which language used in notes

All the scholars of interpreting believe in the vital role of note-taking in CI. However, the question of choice of language is still open to debate. Some scholars such as Matyssek (1989) proposed a language independent system for note taking. But, this system has not come to

reality as it is so complicated that places a big burden on the interpreter's memory. However, apart from this system, most of the authorities of the field take one of two opposing positions.

The first group believes in using the TL in taking notes. This group mentions two reasons for their choice; first the TL creates the opportunity to put aside the surface form of the SL and instead to focus on the meaning of the SL speech. Second, when the interpreter writes his notes in the TL, when he comes to use his notes for rendering the process of interpreting is accelerated.

On the other hand, there is another group who favors the use of the SL in note taking. They state that the purpose of notes is for further use to facilitate the interpretation of the message. Since notes should be taken at the same time the interpreter listens to the speech, so he should concentrate on doing two activities. Now, if notes are to be written on the TL, the SL should be converted to the TL and this process "adds to the number of functions that the interpreter has to perform during his listening phase" (V. Dam, 2004, p. 4). However V. Dam (2004) based on her conducted research concluded that:

> the choice of language in note-taking is governed by mainly the status of the   language in the interpreter's language combination, i.e., whether it is an A-language or B-language (A-language is also called mother tongue and B-language is the language of which the interpreter has perfect mastery), and much less by its status in the task, i.e., whether it is the source or the target language. (p. 12)

7. Conclusion:

Having a powerful short term memory (STM) is one of the requisites for consecutive interpreters. It is of such great importance that the issue of empowering STM should be considered in training students of interpreting. However, the capacity of human mind does not permit interpreters to just resort to their STM to retrieve the uttered information, rather a supporting device should complement the STM. This device is note taking by means of which the processing effort of recalling information is kept as low as possible. No general and consistent method of note taking has been introduced by authorities of the field and professional interpreters create their own system taking notes for consecutive interpreting. However, due to the undisputed role of note-taking in consecutive interpreting, students of interpreting should be taught this skill. Although, the techniques of taking notes can be completely individual for each interpreter, they should observe some basic rules in note taking.

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